

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

German Language and Literature Papers

Modern Languages and Literatures, Department  
of

---

1-1-2001

### Review of Gregor Wittkop: *Hölderlins Nürtingen: Lebenswelt und literarischer Entwurf*

Priscilla A. Hayden-Roy

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, [phayden-roy1@unl.edu](mailto:phayden-roy1@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlanggerman>



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

Hayden-Roy, Priscilla A., "Review of Gregor Wittkop: *Hölderlins Nürtingen: Lebenswelt und literarischer Entwurf*" (2001). *German Language and Literature Papers*. 4.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlanggerman/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in German Language and Literature Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in *Colloquia Germanica* 34:1 (2001), pp. 76-78. Published for the University of Kentucky Department of Germanic Languages and Literature by A. Francke AG Verlag, Bern. Copyright © 2001 A. Francke AG Verlag. Used by permission.

GREGOR WITTKOP: *Hölderlins Nürtingen: Lebenswelt und literarischer Entwurf*. Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte 96. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999. 152 pp. DM 64.

Gregor Wittkop, a name familiar to Hölderlin scholars following his 1993 publication of documents relating to Hölderlin's *Tarmzeit* (*Hölderlin. Der Pflegssohn. Texte und Dokumente 1806–1843 mit den neu entdeckten Nürtinger Pflegschaftsakten*), has combined archival research with literary interpretation to present in his newest study a nuanced view of Hölderlin's Nürtingen. The study consists of two parts: the first deals with Hölderlin's biography and his relationships with family members throughout his life, the second discusses a number of the poet's writings whose thematic center is «home» in both a biographical and idealized sense. Wittkop's familiarity with the social and legal background of relevant archival sources allows him to present a clear, detailed, and historically informed picture of Hölderlin's personal and economic relationships to his family. His literary analyses can be read with profit, and correctly circumscribe the universal-historical, eschatological dimensions of «home» in Hölderlin's writings.

Wittkop begins with the move to Nürtingen in 1774, where Hölderlin's widowed mother entered into a second marriage with Johann Christoph Gok. He offers an informative account of the details of this partnership, bringing into sharper focus the social standing of the families, and shedding new light on the financial arrangements made between the spouses. Particularly informative is his discussion of the role Oberamtmann Carl Friedrich Bilfinger, who was tied personally and financially to both parties, played in paving the way for the marriage and promoting Gok's advancement in Nürtingen.

Wittkop's discussion of Johanna Gok is fair and thorough, avoiding the eulogizing we find in Adolf Beck's article, as well as Pierre Bertaux's and Eva Carstanjen's censure of her (the latter, argues Wittkop, stemming from their lack of familiarity with Württemberg's administrative practices at the time). Based on the few extant documents available, he cautiously sketches a picture of Hölderlin's mother: a woman unremarkable in her conventional expectations for

her son; a woman inclined to sorrow, but not above employing her sadness «als Mittel zur Disziplinierung» (32) in the case of her (in her eyes) errant son; a woman who worried about money, managed it carefully, and was not unwilling to hedge or lie about her finances when it was to her advantage; but also a pious woman who sought to have her children well provided for. Unwilling either to blame or exonerate the mother in regard to the difficult relationship she had with her poet son, Wittkop's conclusion is characteristically moderate: «Das [...] Verhältnis wird als Dilemma noch am ehesten zu begreifen sein» (43).

Wittkop also provides a thorough discussion of the financial relationships between Johanna Gok and her three children, and clarifies the legal wrangling that broke out among the children (Hölderlin's sister, Heinrike Breunlin, his half-brother, Karl Gok, and Hölderlin's guardian, *Amtspfleger* Burk) following her death in 1828. He includes in his appendix a number of documents relevant to this case from the Nürtingen Stadtarchiv which go beyond what is found in the *Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, ultimately it came down to a fight over who should inherit Hölderlin's estate upon his death, Heinrike or Karl. Contrary to Adolf Beck, who characterizes Karl's legal action as «sinn- und pietätlos,» Wittkop argues it was neither (64, 79). Both Karl's and Heinrike's positions were reasonable: Karl followed the intention of his mother as expressed clearly in her testament, while Heinrike's case was bolstered by changes that had been made in 1810 in the inheritance laws in Württemberg.

Wittkop's intention in the second part of his study is to illuminate the connections between Hölderlin's literary production and biography as both relate to Nürtingen. The connections are complicated. Wittkop speaks of «zweierlei Heimkunft» (80–96): on the one hand his biographical homecomings, forced upon him by his failures to support himself abroad, where he met with the misunderstanding and criticism of family and neighbors; on the other hand a homecoming to a *Vaterland* of eschatological proportions, a true home, but one that drew him increasingly into social isolation. A brief discussion of possible influences of Vergil (his eschatological vision in the fourth Eclogue, and his view of war in the *Georgica*) on Hölderlin's

vision of peace precedes Wittkop's analysis of the elegy «Heimkunft.» Written shortly after Hölderlin's return to Nürtingen in 1801 from another failed tutoring position, the poem reflects on both aspects of *Heimkunft*. With references to the geography of Nürtingen and to his family, he evokes a specific place and community. But this Nürtingen is superseded by a vision of a more perfect «Vaterland» for which his home town no longer can provide the model. In the end the poet, while still a part of a community, must bear the «Sorgen» of his vision alone (115–16). In his final chapter Wittkop turns to the letters Hölderlin wrote to Böhlendorff in 1801 and 1802. His concern is to show the changes from the first to the second letter in style and attitude of the Speaker: an increasing lack of affect, increasing depersonalization of the Speaker in his relation both to himself and his addressee, and mythologization of his own fate. Hölderlin's view of home in the second letter, Wittkop observes, is limited to «die heimathliche Natur»: «das Gewitter,» «das Licht,» «die Wälder.» But it is void of people (129–30). Humiliated by another professional failure, crushed by the news of Susette Gontard's death, misunderstood by family and friends, Hölderlin's vision of home «erscheint in Nürtingen Ende 1802 als Isolation» (130).

Wittkop's scholarly contribution lies chiefly in the first part of his book, which benefits from his familiarity with archival sources, and his knowledge of the social and legal history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Württemberg. However the literary analyses of the second part sketch out well the complicated relationship of biography and literary work as both bear on the problem of Hölderlin's «home.» Wittkop's book represents a pleasant alternative to much of Hölderlin research in the modesty of his claims, the moderate tone of his conclusions, and his generosity towards other scholars, even those with whom he disagrees.

Priscilla Hayden-Roy  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln